

The National Defense Authorization Act- May 11, 2006

Rule on H.R. 5122- The National Defense Authorization Act

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M. Speaker,

Every day, the thousands of men and women who are based in the United States and elsewhere protect our borders, defend our national security, and ensure our piece of mind. Many of them have been deployed around the world, to Iraq and elsewhere.

They have performed their duties with honor, and I want them to know that we have the highest regard and respect of myself and of my constituents.

The men and women of our Armed Forces have entered into a sacred covenant with this nation.

They have pledged to place their lives on the line for us...and in return, we have promised to give them the tools they need to fulfill their promise, and the respect worthy of someone willing to make the ultimate sacrifice for this country.

The underlying legislation for this rule represents the embodiment of our commitment to the troops.

And while I know that this overall bill enjoys bipartisan support, including mine, I must point out that this morning, I believe the Leadership of this body has betrayed that covenant.

It seems that just one week after passing a so-called "reform" bill with no teeth, this Majority is back to their same old tricks: arrogantly preventing debate and consideration of critical measures that could improve the bill, and the lives of the people serving this nation.

They even prevented the distinguished ranking member of the Armed Services Committee, Mr. Skelton, from offering an amendment to his own defense bill.

The Skelton Amendment would have prevented the co-pays for medication for our military and their families from going up - which they will if this bill is passed without the Skelton Amendment.

But the Republican leadership refused to make it in order.

And for those Americans who aren't familiar with the Rules Committee, and I expect that's most of them, and how it works, what that effectively means is that a select few in the Republican Leadership decide what the entire Congress, and the entire nation, and our men and women in uniform will get.

They decided on their own, without even a vote on the House floor, without debate and consideration of the full body.

Given the rhetoric we hear on this floor everyday - about our troops and how important they are - I feel compelled to ask my friends in the Majority to justify, how less than 24 hours after they approved \$70 billion in tax breaks for the wealthy, how they could refuse to allow us to even consider a measure to improve the healthcare of our troops and their families?

We owe our troops more respect than this.

It is for similar reasons that many of my Democratic colleagues and I were concerned with Section 590 of this authorization.

That section of the bill removes a longstanding requirement in our military code that requires chaplains to exhibit a level of tolerance, compassion, and understanding towards the religious diversity of the soldiers to whom they administer

counsel.

Can you imagine that, Mr. Speaker? We are taking away the idea that they should serve with tolerance, compassion, and understanding. It was too inflammatory.

I should say, M. Speaker, that I am confident that our chaplains have both the sense and the respect for their fellow soldiers to do this and do it willingly.

But why would this Majority lower that standard and expect anything less from our chaplains, as they clearly do?

We have soldiers of every faith and no faith fighting for us under the American flag. They all deserve our respect...particularly in moments of great despair or need.

Is this Majority so arrogant as to suggest that they should micromanage how a chaplain administers faith on a battlefield?

I can think of few things more offensive or absurd.

My friend Mr. Israel offered an amendment to this bill that would have corrected this problem, restoring the requirement that all chaplains demonstrate sensitivity, respect and tolerance.

But Mr. Israel's amendment was tossed out the window along with common sense on this issue. It has been forbidden by the Leadership from even being considered on the floor today.

As was an amendment from Reps. Tierney and Leach, which would have established a Truman like commission, which we have been trying for two years to do, one designed to ferret out corruption and incompetence in military contracting.

And for some reason the Majority of this House does not want to look at where all that money is missing in Iraq.

Despite the fact that the same measure has passed this House numerous times, despite the fact that it is the clear will of this body that a Truman-style commission be created, and despite the fact that the word "incompetence" has become the most apt description of this administration, a select few in this leadership made a decision for all of us: that we would not even consider that amendment today, an amendment which, were it enacted, would allow us to go looking for the \$9 billion in taxpayer money that this Administration has literally lost in the war in Iraq.

There are many more amendments to this bill which this Leadership has refused to allow us to consider today.

Because they already have made the decisions for us here in this body - and for the American people without their consent, they decided for us, in a back room, that we will not be allowed to consider Mr. Markey's amendment, which would prevent your tax-dollars from being used to torture people in the name of the United States of America.

I know that makes all of us proud, that we are saying we are going to go ahead to allow torture.

I never thought I would see the day in this country when our leaders in Congress would compromise our core values so horribly, and to do so without our consent is unconscionable.

The question my fellow Americans should be asking themselves is, why? Why won't the Republican Leadership allow the free flow of ideas that is supposed to be the hallmark of this government?

I think we're beginning to see how the rigidity of their agenda, the narrow focus of their concern, and their obsession with control are not only damaging their own political future, but are deeply damaging this nation.

Even though the complicated challenges we face no longer seem to fit the Republicans' narrow set of solutions, they march onward in lockstep with their unyielding and ineffective agenda.

But reality seems to be playing out much differently than their program allows for. Tax cuts for the rich can't save the world, and they can't save America. Preventing Americans from talking about an idea doesn't make it go away. And the ends don't always justify the means.

Democrats and the rest of America have already opened their eyes to these realities.

Why doesn't this Republican Leadership open theirs?